

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NEW DELHI 008510

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/04/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [PBTS](#) [PTER](#) [ASEC](#) [PK](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: DESPITE TERROR BLAST, NEW KASHMIR CHIEF MINISTER ASSUMES DUTIES

REF: A. NEW DELHI 8120

[1](#)B. NEW DELHI 8508

[1](#)C. NEW DELHI 8607

Classified By: Political Counselor Geoff Pyatt for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Despite a suicide car bombing that killed five, Cabinet Affairs Minister and Sonia Gandhi close aide Ghulam Nabi Azad became Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir November 2, as per a 2003 power-sharing agreement between Congress and former Chief Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed's PDP party. Azad has a tough job ahead of him, including quashing terror, managing popular expectations in J&K, sustaining Kashmir's march toward normalcy, and avoiding the impression that he is Sonia Gandhi and the Delhi government's errand boy. Azad's tenure will witness furious jockeying among Kashmiri political parties to position themselves for 2008 elections, proving India's policy that genuine democracy entrusted to Kashmiris will be the key to ending a fifteen year insurgency that no longer garners popular support. END SUMMARY.

SONIA FINALLY DECIDES TO CAN MUFTI

[1](#)2. (C) After weeks of speculation, and as we foreshadowed in Ref A, UPA Supremo Sonia Gandhi decided late October 27 to oust Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) Chief Minister (CM) Mufti Mohammed Sayeed per their 2003 power-sharing agreement to switch from his PDP party to Congress rule by the end of October 2005. Her decision, after much public hemming and hawing, means Cabinet Affairs Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad of Jammu has become the first CM of J&K not from the Valley, and the first Congress CM in three decades. Our contacts, including a Communist MLA and a PDP functionary characterize him as a man who will place a firm hand on the tiller of government. We assess that Sonia knuckled under to intense pressure from power-hungry Congress MLAs who were outraged at the possibility that, for reasons of national interest and due to the earthquake, Sonia might allow Mufti to continue in power. Those MLAs, the papers reported, even threatened to defect to the PDP if power did not come to them. Sonia's decision flew in the face of editorials by the Hindustan Times, Indian Express, and Times of India that urged that Mufti remain in the job to ensure proper earthquake relief, continue his work improving the human rights situation in the Valley, and facilitate Delhi-Srinagar dialogue. The way in which Sonia made the decision also particularly infuriated Mufti's daughter, Mehbooba, who, while publicly gracious, was privately upset that her father had been jerked around for weeks before Sonia finally administered the coup de grace that they had known all along was coming but had been led to believe might be delayed.

TERRORISTS CRASH THE PARTY

[1](#)3. (C) On the day of Azad's inauguration in Srinagar November 2, terrorists sent him an unwelcome welcome present by killing four in a suicide bombing just a few hundred yards from Mufti's private residence, but 15 kms from the inauguration site. The press reported that a Jaish-e-Muhammed (JeM) suicide bomber detonated a bomb after rushing through a police roadblock in a Maruti car. Indian government sources speculate the bomber sought to test defenses around Mufti's new home, send Azad a signal that the earthquake had not wiped them out, and also signal to Sonia their displeasure that separatist-friendly PDP was out of power (Ref B).

SEPARATISTS YAWN

[1](#)4. (C) The separatists viewed the democratic transfer of power as a bit of a snooze. Mirwaiz Omar Farooq of the moderate Hurriyat characterized it as an "internal" matter that would not lead to any final settlement of Kashmir's status. Hardline Hurriyat leader SAS Geelani said the transfer would make no difference to Kashmiris. Shabir Shah said the transfer did not affect him since he really only wants freedom (azadi) not Azad. Shah added that the transfer continued Delhi's long tradition of unfulfilled promises, noting that Delhi's high-handedness continued even in the shabby way in which Mufti learned of his ouster by watching TV news. Bilal Lone told us Mufti was not a sacred cow for the separatists, so they are not perturbed at his departure. What they left unsaid is that they are not outraged, as some

in the commentariat had expected, that a Congress-wallah from Jammu is taking over in their precious Srinagar. Professor Anand Sahay, writing on [www.rediff.com](http://www.rediff.com) speculated that the reason people in the Valley are giving Azad a chance is because conditions there are as normal as they have been in 15 years, resentment against Delhi has given way to resentment against the terrorists (who cannot be held accountable in court for their horrific excesses) for causing the bulk of deaths during the insurgency, and Kashmiris feel they were "had" by Jehadis who promised them freedom but brutalized them for not being sufficiently fundamentalist in their faith. As a result, Sahay argues, J&K is becoming a normal state for the first time, and the old unwritten rules about imposing puppet regional parties no longer apply, hence the popular acceptance of Azad's accession.

#### WHO'S WHO IN AZAD'S KASHMIR

-----

15. (C) Continuing with the power-sharing formula that emerged from the 2002 elections, the PDP's Muzaffar Hussain Beigh will serve as Deputy Chief Minister, while the former Deputy in Mufti's government, Congress minister Mangat Ram Sharma, was retained as a Cabinet minister without portfolio. Six Congress and five PDP ministers also took the oath of office, none of whom are women. Kashmiris (from the Valley) continue to dominate, with seven, while Jammu received four ministers, and Ladakh two; as usual, Sikhs and Hindu Pandits got frozen out. The J&K government will shift to Jammu November 7 to avoid the Valley winter, re-starting work after the Eid holiday. Azad will first focus rounding out his cabinet. The new government should be in place by late November, after which Azad will focus on shifting people around in the bureaucracy. Already, the media are reporting terror in the bureaucracy at Azad's threats to clean up the notorious corruption in the J&K administration, although Tahir Mohi-ud-din, an editor at a Kashmiri news magazine told us the ministers in Azad's government are also corrupt. A prominent Kashmiri businessman, Altaf Bukhari, agreed that all the Congress members of the government are known for their corruption. Azad's resignation as Parliamentary Affairs minister in the central cabinet will also likely accelerate the long rumored Cabinet reshuffle in Delhi (Ref C).

#### THE TO-DO LIST

-----

16. (C) Azad has taken the reins of power in the aftermath of the worst natural disaster in J&K's modern history. He has to demonstrate to Kashmiris that his government can deliver relief supplies efficiently despite the transfer. He also has a continuing insurgency and consequent terrorism to deal with. He must manage relations with splintered and fractious separatists even as they, in turn, talk to Delhi and Islamabad. He will have to shed his reputation as Sonia's long-time "chamcha" (suck-up/errand boy) by appearing to stand up to Delhi from time to time. In his inaugural address, Azad said custodial killings by security forces and terrorism by insurgents would not be tolerated. In a rhetorical show of strength and moral clarity, he called the insurgents terrorists, not using the namby-pamby "militant" formulation preferred by a terrified news media. He also promised to continue Mufti's "Healing Touch" human rights policies. Azad will have to manage resentment of Kashmir from Jammu and Ladakh, which perpetually feel slighted by Delhi's obsession with the Valley. The valley's unemployment remains a headache.

#### COMMENT: NO HONEYMOONS IN KASHMIRI POLITICS

-----

17. (C) Sonia's decision in one sense put Congress' narrow interests ahead of those of the people of the Valley or even national interests. Many think tank types in Delhi had urged Mufti's retention because he had done so much to calm the Valley. Moreover, Mufti had acted as a circuit breaker of sorts, protecting the Center from Kashmiris' ire at the government. Azad, as "Delhi's man" will be hampered in trying to play that role. Sonia's decision also suggested that the UPA really is feeling vulnerable in managing its coalition and could not afford the additional dissent that a decision not to pursue the Chief Ministership likely would have provoked among the Congress rank and file. While the Hurriyat have carefully remained out of this PDP-Congress power drama, the National Conference of Farooq and Omar Abdullah are delighted that their PDP nemeses are out of power. Sonia may still compensate Mufti with some senior portfolio in Delhi, while Mehbooba works to weaken the National Conference and survive Congress' predations on her flock in the Valley prior to 2008 elections. Meanwhile, Azad, sniffing, perhaps, National Conference and PDP weakness, will work to position Congress to make big gains before the 2008 poll. We doubt the PDP-Congress coalition will survive the next election as a result. What is sure is that there will be furious jockeying from now until 2008 between the major parties.

18. (C) Meanwhile, all eyes are on the currently-on-hold Delhi-Srinagar dialogue to see if the Hurriyat can be inveigled to contest elections in 2008. If they do, the treacherous party politics of Kashmir will get even more dangerous, but party machinations and regular elections will have won the day, with ballots beating bullets after 15 years of seething insurgency. Azad and Sonia and Manmohan Singh must continue the trend the BJP started of devolving real democracy to Kashmiris, and treating J&K like an ordinary state and not as a mistrusted ward of Delhi that must be kept on a short leash. The insurgency found its birth in Delhi's arrogance, yet its death draws nearer as Delhi curbs its tendencies toward meddling. In this regard, Azad and the Congress party face the challenge of building on the BJP's and Mufti's achievements in making J&K look more and more like a normal state in India's democracy.

MULFORD